

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

EXHIBITION OF

TILES AND TILEWORK,  
OLD AND NEW

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**T**HIS Exhibition, the fifth of a series arranged by the Museum in collaboration with the Council for Art and Industry, has been planned to show the whole range of the art of tile-making, as practised from the Middle Ages to the present day. Tiles made for the covering and decoration of floors, walls and ceilings are included within its scope.

The technical and artistic resources of tilework were until recent times largely those belonging to earthenware in general. Conspicuous advantages were the plastic nature of unbaked clay, making it readily shaped to various sizes and patterns, its hardness and durability when fired, and above all the imperishable colour of glazes and ceramic pigments, with their singular qualities of softness, depth and brilliance. A free touch and stylisation are moreover called for in most ceramic painting, the techniques of which inhibit a tedious and laboured naturalism. In use as a flooring material tiles are more durable than wood, more convenient than stone and more readily decorated by moulding, impressing and freehand cutting. In hot weather and in hot countries the tiled walls of a shaded room give more than the appearance of coolness, and being relatively impervious to moisture, glazed surfaces are easily kept clean by washing. These qualities have for long recommended the use of tiles in kitchens and dairies, and in more modern times in bathrooms, shops and factories.

The history of tilework as an art is again to a large extent shared with that of pottery in general. The medieval inlaid, stamped and relief-decorated floor-tiles of Northern Europe belong to the more important minor arts of their time. Here as in the contemporary pottery vessels, the varying colour of unrefined clays was turned to artistic advantage. Excellent in design, they show also an admirable practical sense; their patterns were not destroyed with the slightest wear like the decoration on the Italian Renaissance floor-tiles, where a passion for painting was given free rein regardless of the certainty of its early defacement.

Room 144,  
Screens I & II

Room 144,  
Desk-case A

Hand-work in the cutting and use of stamps gave freedom and the charm of accident to the medieval tiles, qualities naturally absent from mechanically produced modern imitations. More specifically modern floor-tiles generally show the characteristic virtue of a clean precision in their manufacture, which has enlisted the aid of scientific research in the production of an intensely hard and durable substance.

Reverse of  
Screens III &  
IV & on the ad-  
jacent columns

Screens III &  
IV

West Wall, VI

West, South  
& East Walls,  
VII-X

West Wall, V

Screens I & II

In the Near East, where tilework was first used to any considerable extent for the decoration of wall surfaces, we find in the medieval period a wealth of powerful and fanciful designs carried out in an incomparable palette of blue, turquoise, green and purple glazes. Tile-mosaic and its imitation by the *cuerda seca* process (in which the colours were kept apart by "dry" lines), together with moulding and free-hand carving, were among the commoner techniques employed. Among the examples shown are some superb fragments of carved tilework and mosaic from Samarkand and Bokhara in Turkestan, from Isfahan in Persia, and from Brussa and Karaman in the Turkish dominions in Asia Minor. Painting in blue and golden lustre as well as in enamel colours and actual gilding was chiefly a resource of the Persian tile-makers. Kashan was here the principal centre of manufacture, but at the capital city of Rayy (the Rages of the Apocrypha), before its destruction by Mongol invaders in 1221, some exquisitely refined painting was done in these techniques. In all these styles the finest work seems to have been reserved for inscriptions, usually quotations from the Koran, which in the Islamic world formed a fitting substitute for the figure-painting discouraged by the Prophet.

Painting of a new kind, inspired by Chinese porcelain of the early part of the Ming period, became popular in Persia and Syria in the 15th century. The whole of Asia had in the previous century come under the sway of the Mongols, who had encouraged intercourse between Near and Far East. Some beautiful tiles from the Great Mosque at Damascus, dating from about 1425, are original work in this manner, which was continued and developed in Asia Minor, principally at Isnik (Nicaea). Here in the second half of the 16th century and later the so-called Rhodian pottery was produced. This famous Turkish tilework, the most sumptuous ever made, shows a wealth of naturalistic and formal motives painted on a pure white ground in a palette of brilliant colours eventually dominated by a superb red. The Turkish styles were closely imitated in Syria and Egypt; and in Persia some excellent and distinctive tile-painting was occasionally done in this same period.

In Spanish tilework, which was at first made by Moorish workmen, the same techniques were adopted, but here the mosaic and *cuerda seca* processes were the predecessors of a new technique, that of the *cuenca* (hollow) tile, in which a pattern of raised ridges defined the areas of coloured glaze.

Other Spanish tiles of the 15th and early 16th centuries, remotely inspired by the Syrian work, show decoration still Gothic in style, in blue on a white ground, usually painted but sometimes stencilled, as well as painting in black and grey and brick red on a singular class of powerfully-drawn ceiling tiles. The Spanish blue-and-white tiles were in their turn the inspiration of the painting on the earliest Italian maiolica tiles, which developed from the strong, almost Gothic foliate patterns of the late 15th century into more elaborate Renaissance designs, typically represented on the pavements at S. Francesco at Forli and at the Petrucci Palace at Siena. A few tiles from these pavements included in the Exhibition will serve to show the sensitive touch and apparently inexhaustible fancy of the artists responsible for these masterpieces.

The Italian polychrome styles were taken up by tile-makers in Spain and the Netherlands, in the southern Tyrol, and elsewhere in Europe, until in the course of the 17th century a new wave of importations of porcelain from China brought a fashion for decoration in blue only. The productions of the great Dutch tile industry were at first in a polychrome obviously inspired by Italian maiolica, but by 1700 painting in blue only or in purple had come to predominate. English tile-making showed the same inspiration until the introduction of transfer-printing brought new resources.

After 1800 the Dutch and kindred traditions gradually expired, and in the latter part of the 19th century an excessive consciousness of the past brought many revivals, particularly of the Renaissance styles. These often employed lithographic transfers for the mechanical reproduction of painting, in a manner which has regrettably survived to the present day. (The exhibition includes no example of this, but some modern kitchen tiles are shown in which bold stencilling, frankly displayed, has been used as the basis of excellent polychrome decoration). To the movement for reform started by William Morris belong the tiles made in imitation of the Turkish by William de Morgan, and those produced in the same manner, but in more original designs, by Messrs. Doulton and Company. On the same wall are some tiles with raised outlines in the Spanish "*cuenca*" manner designed by Walter Crane and by Lewis F. Day in 1902; these are characteristic and original work of their time. Variants of the same technique (in which the outlines are sometimes "trailed" freehand in "slip" or semi-liquid clay-mixture) were used in more recent work shown on the adjacent screens. In the pedestal-cases are shown examples of raised lettering drawn in the same manner, as well as other lettered panels moulded and painted.

The best modern painted tiles revive the Dutch and English traditions of the 18th century, and show brushwork as lively as any on the older specimens. Changed economic conditions of course rule out from factory production to-day such original creative

Room 143,  
South Wall, XI

South Wall,  
XII

Desk-case B,  
& on the floor

Screens  
XIII, XIV &  
XV

Screen XVI

Screen XIX

North Wall,  
XXII

Screens  
XXIII &  
XXIV

Screens XVII,  
XVIII, XIX

Room 143,  
Screen XX

Walls &  
column, XXI

Screen XXV

Screen XXIII  
Screen XXV

work as is found, for example, on Italian tiles of the Renaissance period, but some tile-decoration done by independent artists is of special interest in this connection, both for its merit as design and as the original free brushwork of the designers themselves. The same merits are often to be found in the work of studio-potters who have made tiles; here yet another wave of Chinese influence has suggested the use of stoneware and felspathic glazes, giving their work a strictly ceramic interest too often lacking in commercially produced tiles made from machine-compressed dry clay dust and not from plastic clay. (A technical exhibit in Desk-case C, North Wall, Room 143, explains the modern processes.)

Perhaps the most significant modern work, however, is that in plain coloured glazes employing to the full the resources of modern machinery and modern chemistry and making a merit of machine-made precision. Interest of surface-texture (whether rough or smooth, glossy or matt), purity and distinction of colour, and a hard cleanliness have here replaced the freedom and vitality of handwork and the charm of accident in broken colour, though this last has too often been questionably imitated in artificially mottled effects. Where decoration is used on such modern tiles it is appropriately limited to abstract designs (as in some relief tiles shown), or geometrical patterns painted on the tiles with the help of such mechanisms as the aerograph. Work of this kind is characteristically modern in the sense that in its making and use, the handwork of the artist-craftsman has been replaced by the constructions of the architect-designer for the machine.

Valuable help in the selection of the modern tiles has been given by Mr. W. B. Dalton, Mr. Harold Stabler, and representatives of the Tile-Manufacturers' Association, and thanks are due to the manufacturers and artist-potters who have kindly lent specimens for exhibition. The makers' and designers' names are in every case given on the labels.

A guide to the Museum collection of tiles, containing sixty-five pages of text and forty-nine plates, has been prepared and is on sale at the Book Stall and at the offices of the Department of Ceramics in Room 145, price in stiff paper cover, 3s. 6d. (by post 3s. 9d.), or in cloth binding, 4s. 6d. (by post 4s. 10d.).

